more things in streams and bathtubs

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more things in streams and bathtubs

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

When Will catches a strange fish in his stream, the last thing he expects is for it to turn into a man with a merman tail.

“My name is Hannibal,” the impossible merman in Will’s bathtub says. “You may eat me now.”

Notes

This is my fic for MerMay. If I had timed this better, I would have written a proper "The Little Mermaid" AU to coincide with the release of the Disney live action "The Little Mermaid" movie but I did not so instead have a MerMay fic where Will just catches fish-Hannibal and brings him home for dinner.

Title comes from a Hamlet line: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Also this fic was supposed to be, like, 5-7k. No I don't want to talk about how it's over 15k. Stop laughing at me, Vic.

And yes, I *am* stealing my merpeople magic system from my own stronger than the tide fic but I was too lazy to craft another new magic system. Also borrowing details about the merman form from the amazing Reflets dans l'eau by DarkmoonSigel (no I will not shut up about this fic please read it if you haven't already).

See the end of the work for more notes

Will might be psychologically unstable by the FBI's standards, but he isn't stupid. His job at the academy comes with a good salary and better benefits, and one of those benefits includes vacation days where he can well and truly disconnect from the outside world – vacation days that he either has to use or lose, and Will isn't about to lose them.

The best part is shutting off his phone and laptop, honestly. Jack knows his home address, of course, but he's not an official consultant, and payroll gets twitchy about overtime.

So, every so often, when his dreams are a little more blood-soaked than usual and his dogs haven't seen him for more than one hour a week for rushed feeds, Will turns in a request for time off, gets the approval, and then takes immense pleasure in putting up an out of office autoreply.

His dogs are thrilled to get more time with him, and he's always happy to get more time with them. He restocks their food and treats, he goes for long walks with them, he plays fetch in the yard.

Of course, he doesn't just go on vacation for his dogs' sake, and the long walks also aren't just to exercise his energetic pack.

His house at Wolf Trap comes with a lot of acreage. The nearest neighbor is pretty far away, and that had suited Will just fine. The house had been in need of some fixing, but Will had taken care of that.

And, of course, there is the stream. Honestly, Will had signed mostly for the stream alone.

Nothing – literally nothing – is more relaxing than stepping into the cool water of the stream, feeling the rocks under his feet and the sun against his face, and casting a line into those bubbling waters. On the bad days, sometimes Will thinks about lying down and letting those quiet waters carry him away, away from Jack and his bloody crime scenes and bloodier killers. On the good days, he catches fish and makes himself a home caught and cooked dinner.

Today is one of the good days. Will reels in his first catch of the day – a nice large rainbow trout – and then begins the delicate process of carefully wriggling the hook out of its mouth. It writhes and jumps, but Will was taught by the best; in no time at all, he's striding over to the bank and gently sliding the trout from his net straight into his bucket.

"Sorry," Will tells it, as it swims in tight circles in the bucket. "If you were a bit smaller, maybe, you'd live for another day, but you're a good size for dinner."

The fish, predictably, does not reply. That's what's great about fishing: Will can get all the results without anyone complaining about his methods, or questioning his tactics, or, worse, trying to imply that he's crazy.

He catches a brook trout next, and it's large enough to join the rainbow one in the bucket. The next rainbow, however, is too small; Will pries the hook free and then bends down to

release it. It splashes him as it darts free, but that's why Will wears waders, so he just shrugs off the water, resets his line, and casts again.

For a time, he gets no bites at all. It doesn't bother him, though; sometimes the fisherman outsmarts the fish, and sometimes the fish outsmarts the fisherman. Such is the way it goes, and Will already has enough for dinner, anyways. He breathes in the fresh air, revels in the cool water around his legs, and lets himself fall into the rhythm of cast, twitch, reel, waiting to see what fish are tempted enough by his lure to make a pass at his hook.

When he feels the telltale nibble on the line, he keeps his breathing steady and his movements casual. *Nothing scares a fish away more than excitement,* his father used to say, and Will learned the hard way how right he was.

Nibble, twitch. Nibble, twitch. Nibble, nibble, twitch twitch. It's like a game, making the lure dance so that its bright colors and shiny additions mimic the insects the fish like, but not such a dance that the fish gives up and finds easier food. Will may not be able to find balance at work, but the balance of luring in fish? That he mastered long ago.

Sure enough, not long afterwards, he feels the telltale solid *yank* that a fish has decided to give it a go. One solid jerk lets the hook sink in, and just like that, Will falls into the next part of the dance.

Pull too hard, and the line might break. Be too lax, and the fish might swallow the lure too deep. Reel too fast, and the fish won't be exhausted enough at the end. Reel too slow, and the line might get tangled.

Balance. Will grins and makes the fish dance at the end of his line, reeling and pausing, reeling and pausing, until at last he can see the flash of bright fish skin at the top of the water.

The game doesn't get easier when the fish gets closer, of course. A fish is never quite caught until it's safely in a bucket or cooler, and even then, woe betide the fisherman who doesn't brace their equipment right and gets their bucket knocked over by a thrashing fish that promptly escapes. Also, a hooked fish can put up a fight like nothing else; Will's never quite understood the saying of a cornered animal, because in his opinion, a hooked fish is far more dangerous. A cornered animal is cornered in a human's territory; a hooked fish is hooked in *its* territory, and a fall even in a shallow stream can be enough to cause injury or death.

And this fish is putting up quite a fight. The thrashing of its powerful body sends water flying all over the place; even some of Will's dogs bark at the noise and commotion. The tension in the line is immense, and Will grits his teeth and carefully adjusts his pace of reeling and pausing so the line doesn't break but that the fish is still duly tired out.

Then, at long last, Will can finally bend down and net his catch.

His first thought is that it's a big fish. Certainly big enough to take home, but beyond that, it's bigger than his rainbow or his brook. Will can definitely understand how it was able to put up such a fight and strain his line.

His second thought is that it's a fish he doesn't recognize. Not impossible, but it's definitely unusual. Will knows almost all of the fish that can be caught in Virginia, and this one – long and brown with a pale red streak and bright red fins and silver spots – doesn't match anything he typically is used to catching.

His third thought is a solid *what the hell*, because he raises the net up and the fish, taken away from the water, flops over and glares at him balefully, and it does so with *bright red eyes*.

"What the hell," Will says aloud, because it bears repeating.

Fish can have red in their eyes. Will's caught plenty of rock bass. But rock bass don't have red streaks or red fins, and also Will has never caught them here in this particular stream.

Also, when Will peers closer at its twitching body, he notices that the silver spots are actually gleaming as the fish futilely flaps its gills. And not gleaming under the sun because the fish is wet; no, these spots are dimming and brightening as the fish tries to breathe.

"What the *hell,*" Will says, and promptly gets slapped in the face by the tail of an angry thrashing fish.

Will splutters, almost drops it, and decides to do his surveillance from a safer position. He trudges back to the bank and plops the fish and the net over his bucket, so that the thrashing is contained and also much less wet.

The silver spots are still glowing, though, and they're even more obvious now that the fish is in the shadow of his body. And the red eyes are even creepier.

" . . . Right. Well, I suppose I can figure out what fish you are later," Will says. "Right now I need to get that hook out of you."

Not that he thinks the fish can understand him – fish cannot understand human speech any more than they can reply to it – but his father used to say that talking helped, to soothe both predator and prey, so that they both were somewhat steady during the delicate operation of working the hook back out. And it's certainly never hurt Will to softly talk as he pries the hook free from the quivering but mostly still fish.

"There we are!" Will says triumphantly, when he finally succeeds. "Sorry, I'm sure this is rather undignified, but, um, there wasn't any real bait on this anyways, so it's not like I deprived you of dinner. Just some tinsel and feathers and other knick knacks I picked up, see?"

Those red eyes roll, as if the fish is genuinely looking at the lure that fooled it.

"Guess you went for the red lure because it matched your stripes and fins, huh?" Will continues. "You're actually the first fish I've caught on this lure. Took me a long time to make it. Couldn't quite get it perfect, kept fiddling with it. But then I pricked myself by accident on it yesterday, so I decided that was a sign that I should stop tinkering with it. I wonder if you could taste my blood on it."

The fish gives an emphatic whack of its tail, slapping it against the edge of the bucket with a solid thump.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, you want to breathe,” Will says. He rotates the net and lets the fish slip into the water with the other fish. Normally, his bucket is big enough that it could fit three fish with ease, but this latest one is so massive that his bucket looks a tad cramped.

Will sighs and scrubs at his hair. On one hand, it’s absolutely big enough to take home, no question about it. And unnerving red eyes aside, he doesn’t necessarily *need* to know its species to be able to scale it and flay it and cook it.

On the other hand, those unnerving red eyes are almost following Will as he moves, and that’s a level of creepy that he’s only used to getting at crime scenes.

“Well, now you’ve got me in a bit of a pickle,” Will tells it. “If it was just you, I’d take you home and slice you up and eat you, but I actually have enough fish to make dinner with tonight. So I could technically release you. But I am kind of curious what kind of fish you are. I’ve never seen one with your patterning. Or . . . eyes. Wish I had a camera right now. Or Google.”

For the first time, he almost regrets the fact that he never takes his phone fishing. At least with his phone, he could get proof of his catch, as well as a photo to send off to someone who might be able to actually identify its species.

As he deliberates, he watches the fish swim in circles. Unlike the rainbow or the brook trout, this fish swims in slow, graceful circles, not the panicked swimming of trout trying to escape, as if it has nothing to fear despite being removed from the flowing water that it was happily cruising down five minutes ago.

Also, and this is the weirdest part, the other two trout are actually keeping *away* from the red eyed fish, practically resting on top of each other to stay out of its way.

It’s creepy.

Will’s seen creepier.

“I think you’re going come home with me,” Will says. “I’d like to get a few good photos of you, maybe in the sink or the bathtub. I’ll eat you after I learn your name.”

The fish does another tight, graceful spin in the bucket, and Will could almost swear that it winks at him as he slides the lid over the top and begins packing everything up.

When Will gets home, the first thing he does is clean his gear, pack it neatly away, and feed his dogs. They’re well trained, but hunger can tempt even the best, so Will always tries to make sure they’re exhausted and full so that they’re less likely to try and go for his fish.

Then he hauls his bucket into the kitchen and takes off the lid and –

“What the *hell*?” Will says.

Because there are two fish swimming around in his bucket. Not three. Two. One trout and then his weird red-eyed monster fish.

Will checks the bucket lid and the bottom of his bucket, just to be sure, but there are no holes and the seal is perfect. Not that the fish could have managed to wriggle out anyways, because Will sure as hell would have noticed an entire fish getting out as he dragged the very heavy bucket home. Yet Will checks anyways, because otherwise, he can only think of two solutions for why he would have left the river with three fish and come home with two.

One: some fish have somehow learned how to teleport, and Will caught one of them. Exceedingly unlikely.

Two: one of his remaining fish ate the other one. Less unlikely, but usually Will only sees that happen with smaller fish as prey.

Will turns the kitchen light on. The water in the bucket is indeed a faint pink, as though someone had tipped a dusting of blush in it, and a few shimmering scales line the bottom, as though they had been torn off in a struggle.

In fact, the red-eyed fish has actually settled at the bottom, amongst those few scales, and although a fish face does not remotely have the same options for expressing emotion as a human face or even a dog face, Will could swear that it looks exceedingly smug.

Or maybe he's just projecting.

Also, he's hungry, so Will sets aside the questionable and strange occurrences in his bucket to deal with the familiar tackling of making dinner. He dips his hands in and grabs the trout, making sure to give it a few good whacks before he dumps it in the sink. He then covers his sink with his cutting board before turning his attention to the red-eyed fish.

Which is at the top of the bucket and spotting like a damn whale, as if spying on Will's killing of the trout.

"Absolutely not," Will tells it, and snaps the lid back on. Then he heaves the bucket into the bathroom, shutting the door so that his dogs don't follow him.

For a moment, he considers leaving the fish in the bucket, but the water is definitely no longer fresh, for one thing, and for another, it's a very small space for a fish that size. Good for short distance transport; not good for long term keeping. Not that Will intends to adopt the damn thing, but the earliest he can probably release it is tomorrow, and if he doesn't intend to eat it, it would be rude to cause its death by leaving it in a small covered bucket all night long.

So Will sighs, turns on the tub, and lets it fill. He keeps the water temperature cool, approximate to the stream temperature, and ensures that the plug is secure so that the tub doesn't drain.

Then he opens the bucket.

The red-eyed fish immediately flares its fins and swims upwards, as if happy to see him. It's extremely bizarre, given that the only things that rush up to greet him like that are his dogs, and Will feeds them.

"Don't bite me," Will tells it sternly. He dips his hands in and grasps the fish firmly but gently, supporting the head and squeezing the tail, as his father taught him. The fish, strangely, does not fight him, as it did when Will first caught it. It lies completely limp in his hands; for half a second, Will thinks it has died already and has to check that its eyes are still shining, but it is indeed alive.

From there it's a quick shuffle to the tub, and the fish slips into the water, easy as anything. It circles the tub a few times, as if testing its new confinement, and then it swims back to the middle and aims one blood red eye at Will.

It's like being looked at by a laser. Will bites his lips and feels compelled to say, "I know it isn't much, but, uh, I think it's better than the bucket. Sorry, but I wasn't really planning to catch something of your size today. Should've let you go, honestly, but I was curious what type of fish you were. I'll, um. Let you just relax now. Bye."

He backs out of the bathroom, feeling weirdly like a servant bowing out of a noble's chambers, and as he closes the door, he hears a faint splash, as if the fish had jumped out of the water. There is no wet slap, so it doesn't land on the floor, which is a relief, but it also raises another question, which is, did the fish jump to try and get a better look at him?

Which Will emphatically does not want to think about. At all. Nope.

So he heads back to the kitchen and instead turns his attention to the perfectly normal task of scaling, gutting, and frying the perfectly normal trout for a perfectly normal dinner, all while ignoring the faint splashing sounds from the bathroom.

The trout is, in fact, excellent, although Will finds no trace of the other trout in its mouth or stomach. But with fresh caught and fresh cooked fish filling up his stomach and a day's worth of exhaustion from fishing catching up to him, Will feels a lot less concerned about the fact that he has a giant confirmed unidentified fish in his bathtub. He washes his plates, plays with his dogs, and watches some junk television, enjoying a quiet night.

He does, for a brief moment, pick up his phone with the vague idea of taking a picture and sending it off now, but then he realizes that the battery is too low and also it's too late to bother anyone, so he shrugs and gives up. He has an entire week of vacation ahead of him to relax, after all.

He gets so relaxed, actually, that he falls asleep in his comfortable chair by the television, and only wakes up when a particularly loud late night advertisement airs.

"Ugh," Will says. He rubs at his eyes and fumbles for the remote, sighing in relief at the blessed silence that falls. Winston snuffles at his legs, panting softly, which is the deciding vote for Will's silent debate of going back to sleep on the chair or shuffling to his bed,

because Winston is a good boy who will leave Will alone in bed, but he will absolutely nudge Will awake at the crack of dawn when he wants to be fed if Will stays in the chair.

Will does his typical rounds: he checks to make sure the doors are locked, he checks to make sure all of his windows are shut, he makes sure that the trash bin lid is secure so that his dogs can't have a party with his leftovers. After that, he moves to the bedroom.

He's almost there, in fact, when his bladder decides to make itself known now that he's woken up, and so Will groans and turns to shuffle to the bathroom instead, thinking longing thoughts about his soft bed and softer pillows and –

"Hello, Will."

Will does not jump. He absolutely does not jump. He does, however, slam backwards into the wall in a movement that sends his already adrenaline-filled, racing body into overdrive.

There is no longer a fish in his bathtub, which is concerning.

However, instead of the fish, he has an actual *life size human being* in his bathtub, which is incredibly concerning.

"What the – " Will splutters, which is when the man in his bathtub moves and a brilliant red tail catches Will's eye.

"My name is Hannibal," the impossible merman in Will's bathtub says. "You may eat me now."

Will isn't sure how long he stares at the merman in his bathtub. It might be minutes, it might be hours, it might be days. For all he knows, the whole world outside crumbled to dust and a new age rose up in its place. The only thing he is conscious of is sliding down the wall, so that he lands with a rough thump on the ground, and the cold tile shocks him back to his senses.

"You," Will says, and his voice gives out halfway. He clears his throat. "You're a – What are you?"

That impossible long red tail shifts in the bathtub. "I told you; my name is Hannibal," the merman says, and his voice is like water running over rocks in the stream: soothing and dangerous.

"But you have a *tail*."

"And you have legs," Hannibal replies archly, "but I am not commenting on them."

For a ridiculous reason, the words make Will feels self-conscious about his legs. He shuffles and folds his legs underneath him, so that they are somewhat hidden, and when he looks up, Hannibal seems almost . . . disappointed by his action, although Will cannot fathom why.

And, well. Will's father did raise him not to be rude.

He clears his throat. “Okay, so . . . I guess we started off on the wrong . . . fin? Uh, my name is Will.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Uhhh,” Will says, immediately and thoroughly derailed, because people generally do know who Will is after he introduces himself to them, but it’s never been a good thing. Also, and possibly more importantly, he does not remember introducing himself to the fish, and he has no identifying information in this bathroom.

Unless Hannibal somehow got into his medicine cabinet, but given the distinct lack of puddles on the floor, Will thinks not.

Fortunately, Hannibal takes pity on him. “Your kind call us mer. Specifically, they would consider me a merman,” he tells Will. “Although most of your kind think that we are extinct, or myths, or only exist in fairytales.”

“Well, I mean, if you swim around in fish form all the time, yeah, I could see that,” Will says cautiously.

“Oh, we don’t have a fish form. I just happened to be afflicted by a rather ingenious curse,” Hannibal says, casual and cheerful as though he’s announcing a gorgeous weather forecast.

“ . . . You’re cursed.”

“Yes. Fish by day, my true form at night. I think your kind have similar such curses? Although you needn’t worry,” Hannibal reassures him, “my curse is tied to me and me alone. It will not affect you when you consume me.”

“I’m not going to eat you!”

Hannibal actually *frowns* when he hears that, almost like he’s disappointed. “But you said that you would eat me when you learned my name.”

“Yeah, back when I thought you were a fish!”

“I’ll be a fish again when the sun rises, if you prefer that form. But I feel I must point out that you would get a lot more meat off me as I am now.”

“I don’t care about the amount of – you know what, no, I am still not eating you. What the hell.”

Hannibal tilts his head. It’s a motion that Will has seen a hundred times, from confused coworkers and baffled local cops, but on Hannibal it is somehow alien and strange. After a moment, Will realizes why; he moves as though he expects movement to take little effort, as though he is vaguely surprised at gravity’s pull.

As though he is still underwater.

Then Hannibal asks, “Is your hesitation to eat me due to lack of familiarity or fear of causing offense? I can provide instruction, if it is the former; and mer are solitary, so no one will take vengeance for my death, if it is the former. You have the skills.”

“What skills?” Then Will realizes: “Are you calling me a killer?”

“It was not an unskilled hand that I saw earlier, preparing that trout,” Hannibal says.

Will scowls. “That’s different.”

“How?”

“That was a fish. A *normal* uncursed fish. You’re a – a mer,” Will says, stumbling over the word. “You’re alive, you’re sentient – for god’s sake, you *talk*.”

“The trout was alive too, before you gutted it and ate it. It too was sentient. And while my lesser brethren of the waters might be less . . . eloquent, I can assure that trout have their own language with which to speak. Although I will concede that they rarely have anything of value to say.”

“But it was a fish. I’m human. To us, a fish is just – ”

“A different species? How fortunate.” Hannibal smiles widely, and his teeth are very sharp and very white, like a shark. “So am I.”

Will stares at him for a long moment.

Then he says, “You know what: I’m not entirely sure I’m not hallucinating right now. So I am going to bed. Tomorrow, I am going to put you back in the stream and never think about this ever again. Yeah. That sounds like a great plan.”

He pushes himself to his feet, walks out of the bathroom, and slams the door shut, and pointedly does not think about the extremely disappointed “Will” that comes from the bathtub.

He also goes to the upstairs bathroom. Fortunately, there are no pushy, talkative, impossible creatures in there, and so Will is able to relieve his clamoring bladder in peace before he troops back downstairs and falls into bed and dreams of nothing at all.

The next morning, Will peers into bathroom and nothing talks to him, swishes a merman tail, or says impossible things. There is only the red-eyed fish, swimming lazily in loops, as if bored. It does swim closer when Will takes a step inside, but that’s nothing unusual.

Will sighs. “Oh thank god. I mean, I’ve hallucinated worse things, but that was a really bad hallucination,” he tells the fish. “And I have no idea why I’m still talking to you because you don’t understand me.”

The fish’s mouth opens and closes.

Normal fish behavior, but still a little unsettling after last night. Will grabs the shower curtain and drags it closed so that he can use the bathroom in peace.

Unfortunately, this does mean that he has to reopen the shower curtain when he returns with the bucket, which he has thoroughly cleaned. It was not a fun trip inside after he filled it up with water, and it definitely won't be a fun trip back to the stream, but Will doesn't exactly have a better way of carrying the fish back, so bucket it is.

"All right, you're going back to the stream to swim around and eat insects and do whatever other fish things you do," Will says. "Hopefully you don't get successfully tricked by any other fishermen."

The fish darts away from his hands – again, not unusual fish behavior, and Will learned how to corner fish a long time ago. In short order, he has his hands closing around the fish's tail and head and then –

"Ouch!"

Will is yanking his hands out almost immediately before the sensation of pain truly registers. It's a sharp, needle-like pain, as if claws had stabbed him.

Except there are no claws. There's just a fish, innocently flaring its gills as it stares at him.

"Did you just *bite* me?" Will asks incredulously.

The fish swishes its tail.

Fish retrieval then has to take a back seat, because Will needs to rinse and clean his fingers to make sure that the wounds aren't deep and that they don't get infected. It's a simple process, but annoying, and Will lets out a few choice words as he makes sure everything is thoroughly cleaned.

Then he wraps some gauze around it, just to be sure, and comes back to stare at the fish, which has resumed its lazy circles of the bathtub.

"Well, I really hope you aren't poisonous," Will grumbles. "Actually . . ."

He digs out his phone, which charged to full power overnight, and opens the camera. He has to turn on the overhead light and open the curtains just to get the damn thing to focus properly, but he gets a few good shots of the fish, especially its unique markings and huge size. He only gets a blurry close up of its unnerving red eyes, but most fish are identified by markings anyways, so he isn't that concerned.

After a few minutes of fighting with his email, he manages to attach the photos and compose a message to a fellow fish enthusiast who his father had once befriended.

A whoosh indicates that the email is off, and Will lowers his phone and looks at the fish. "Maybe Aleyn will know what the hell you are," he tells it. He starts to put the phone back in his pocket, because surely identification will take some time, but then his phone dings.

Will digs it back out, surprised, but then he opens his email and is much less surprised, because the *ding* of a new message turns out to be an automatic out of office reply, much like Will's own, which states that Professor Aleyn Fisk is on sabbatical and all urgent requests are to be directed to his secretary. Will debates it for about three seconds and then puts his phone away.

"You're weird, but you're not that urgent," he says. "But I guess I can't bring you back to the stream now, because if you are poisonous, I'll need you so that they can figure out what treatment to give me."

The fish blinks at him. It's almost like being winked at.

"Aaaaaand I'm humanizing a fricking fish," Will sighs. "God, I need a drink."

The fish does not do anymore weird things, but, to be fair, that might be because Will closes the shower curtain. He has an absolutely lovely rest of the day, though, playing and bathing his dogs, doing some laundry, crafting some new lures. He loses himself in a lovely new red lure for a few good hours, and only emerges when his stomach finally makes itself known and he rises to make and eat some dinner.

And then the sun goes down, and Will gets sleepy and decides to go to bed, and he walks into the bathroom to brush his teeth and gets a "Hello again, Will."

This time, when he jumps, he kicks the bucket and spends a few precious minutes cursing and hopping around, clutching his stubbed toe.

"Okay," Will says, after he has recovered and sat down again, "so . . . this is new."

"Humans rarely see my kind, so, yes, interactions between us are new," his merman hallucination says agreeably.

"Usually I don't get the same hallucination twice," Will continues. He thumps his head back and stares at the ceiling, idly wondering if his ibuprofen is still good. "Then again, maybe throwing away all of my meds was a mistake."

"I am not a hallucination," his merman hallucination says frostily.

"And that is exactly what a hallucination would say."

A wet slap of something hitting the bathroom tile makes Will startle. He moves his gaze from the ceiling down to the bathtub, and sees that his merman hallucination has moved his tail from resting against the tub wall to draped out of the tub, with the fins resting on the floor. It's a remarkably beautiful hallucination, honestly; Will's dreams are indeed very detailed, but generally that's because they are things he has seen in real life, and yet this tail is a beautiful blood red with gorgeous silver patterning, brightening and dimming on repeat.

"This is not a hallucination. Touch it, if you do not believe me."

Will grimaces. “Yeah, normally when I touch hallucinations, I end up covered in goo. Or blood.”

“I assure you, that will not happen this time.”

Will rubs at his eyes and sighs. “Sure, whatever,” he says, because what’s one more drowning in goo? It may even wake him up this time.

The scales of the tail are hard and glossy under his fingers, but also remarkably cool. Will runs his fingers down and feels how the scales are arranged in an overlapping pattern, like fish scales, except much larger and much stronger. It’s like nothing he’s ever felt before, and even the fins, while delicate and soft like fish fins, are stronger and larger and cooler than others.

They are also tipped with wickedly sharp looking spines.

“Those *are* poisonous,” he is advised. “Do not touch those.”

Will pauses with his fingers about an inch away. His hand is wet, as the tail had been submerged in water, and cold, as the air washes over his wet hand. But he has not been swallowed by goo, he is not drowning in a lake, he is not choking on blood. There are no ghastly apparitions of victims, no grasping hands of killers, no chanting of mantras he wishes he did not understand. Just water and cold and a strong tail twitching under his hands.

Slowly, Will looks up into the calm eyes of the merman sitting in his bathtub. “So . . . you’re not a hallucination,” he says.

“No, I am not.”

Will can actually feel the vibration of the merman speaking through where his hands are still on the merman’s tail, and abruptly he feels like he’s doing something he shouldn’t be. He snatches his hands back, blushing furiously, and scoots away so that there is actual distance between them.

“I’m, uh, sorry. About that.”

“About what?”

“Calling you a hallucination. And, uh, touching your tail.”

“I invited you to touch my tail. There’s no need for apologies on that front. As to thinking me a hallucination – that is understandable, if concerning. Do you normally have hallucinations?”

Will shivers. “All the time.”

The merman inhales deeply. His chest rises, his nose flares – but gills hidden on the sides of his throat also twitch, and that, more than anything, makes it real.

“You do not smell diseased or infected.”

“It’s not a disease,” Will says. He twirls a finger by his head. “Just, uh, an overactive imagination. Too many mirror neurons up here.”

The merman tilts his head. “You speak of empathy.”

“Uhhh,” Will says in response, because he hadn’t really expected a merman from a stream to know that word.

“I am not always trapped in fish form,” the merman explains. “I have walked in your world as well. Humans are very interesting. Well, some humans. One time I studied the trade of medicine and became a doctor. The psychology classes were particularly interesting.”

Will narrows his eyes. “Tell me you weren’t a shrink.”

“Emergency room surgeon,” the merman says, to Will’s great relief. “But I was contemplating perhaps becoming a psychiatrist the next time I walked amongst humans.”

“Yeah, well, fair warning: don’t try to psychoanalyze me.”

That earns him a small smile. Not a polite one that hides offense; this is a real smile, from someone who is intrigued. It’s not the first time Will’s been under the gaze of someone fascinated by him, but it is the first time that he thinks someone has been fascinated without wanting to write a paper about him, which is kind of nice.

“Why not?”

Will lifts his chin. If he won’t give ground to human shrinks, he absolutely isn’t giving ground to a merman shrink. “Because you won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed,” he tells him.

That small smile grows large – and, disturbingly, gains teeth. Very sharp teeth.

Will sets his jaw and does not blink.

“On the contrary, I think I would rather enjoy matching my wit to yours,” the merman says, sounding very pleased by the prospect. “But I will abide by your request. Now then. When are you going to eat me?”

“Uhhh,” Will says, thrown all over again. “I’m not?”

“You said you would.”

Will gives him a look. “You know, I can’t understand most fish, but I imagine most of them would sound way less disappointed about me not wanting to eat them.”

“And that is why they are lesser,” the merman says. “Being eaten by you would be a very high honor. Are you sure I cannot convince you otherwise? Again, I am more than willing to provide you with instruction – ”

“Still a no. Also . . . why do you know how to take yourself apart for eating?” Will asks suspiciously. Because he has also studied anatomy and physiology, but it’s one thing to know where all the vital organs and bones are, and quite another to know how to part flesh and strip bone for the purposes of cooking.

The merman’s smile turns sly and dangerous. “Why do you think I possess such knowledge, sweet Will?”

“Because you’ve eaten other mer before,” Will answers, since apparently his empathy works on humans and mer alike. “So . . . you’re a cannibal.”

The merman makes a dismissive sound. He twitches his tail, those poisonous spines flexing and sparkling, and settles his shoulders against the wall. “Cannibalism would imply that they were equal to me. They were not. They were merely prey, and prey exists to nurture the predators.”

“You see yourself as the apex predator?”

“Is there a reason I should not?”

“Well, I did catch you,” Will points out.

“You did,” the merman says, dipping his head in a bow, “but you also refuse to eat me, as you should.”

“Oh my god, let it go,” Will groans. “I am not eating you. The only thing I am doing is shoving your fishy butt back in this bucket and dumping you back in the stream to do whatever mer do.”

“Hmm.”

“Besides, you said you were cursed. I don’t really want to be cursed.”

“The curse would not spread to you.”

“You keep saying that, but I think my stomach would explode if you went from fish form to mer form inside my guts.”

The merman opens his mouth. Then he closes it, looking strangely thoughtful. “You raise an interesting point,” he says. “I had not considered that my curse might outlast my death. Generally they do not, but . . . Bedelia has always been very powerful. I would not put it past her. And you could eat me in this form, but the preparation would be different than if I was in fish form, and likely insufficient if my mer flesh turned to true fish in your stomach.”

“I can’t believe that it was the logic that you might explode me that turned you off from the whole being eaten thing,” Will feels compelled to say.

“I have no wish to cause your death, Will. I find you very interesting.”

“Well, I don’t. Find you interesting, that is.”

The merman smiles. “Perhaps I can work on changing that.”

“Good luck,” Will snorts. “Tomorrow I am dumping you back in the stream.”

“I would prefer you did not.”

“Why not?”

“If you will deny me the pleasure of being eaten, then I would beg the opportunity to get to know you better. I have not met such an interesting human in a very, very long time, and I think our conversations would be fruitful.”

“I don’t make friends, and I’m not starting with you.”

“Or we could socialize. Like adults. You are an adult, yes?”

“You think I could be a child?”

“I find it difficult to gauge ages in humans. Your features are so . . . ill-defined,” the merman says.

“Whatever. Yeah, I’m adult. I hate socializing too, though.”

“May I remind you that I shall be a fish who is incapable of speaking for half of each day? You need only socialize for a few hours at night, before you go to bed. That is all I am asking. Surely that is not too much of a request?”

Will eyes him. On one hand, he is kind of curious about the merman. He’s always been eager to learn new things, and it would be nice to learn things that aren’t related to murder, how to commit murder, or why people have murdered.

On the other hand: talking.

“Fine,” Will says begrudgingly, when the curiosity wins out. “A few days. Then I am taking you back to the stream, no matter what.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Will.”

They shake hands, and Will tries very hard not to think that he’s made a deal with the devil. It helps that the merman’s skin is cool to the touch when all of the nuns used to say that hell was hot, but the merman’s blood red tail and satisfied smug grin really don’t help matters.

So Will says, “And tonight’s few hours are over, so, bye!” and books it to bed before the merman can make him acquiesce to any other requests.

Will really does mean to only let Hannibal stay for, like, three days tops, because he has always enjoyed his solitude and his track record with people who are fascinated by him and/or want to have deep in depth psychiatric conversations with him is not good.

Yet Hannibal is different. For one thing, he isn't disgusted or deterred by Will's line of work. Most people can't handle hearing Will describe someone getting planted in a mushroom garden or turned into a beehive or sewn into a human quilt, but Hannibal thinks it's extremely interesting and actually willingly engages in questioning to try and understand the killers' mindsets. He even offers commentary sometimes, as if he thinks he could have done the gardening or sewing better.

For another, Hannibal does not think Will is one case away from losing himself. Alana thinks that Will is too delicate and most of Jack's superiors think he's too unstable, but Hannibal is unerringly steadfast in his idea that Will has a beautiful gift.

And, well. Hannibal just has a really strange sense of humor.

"You – I'm sorry, I tell you about a man who turns vocal chords into an instrument, and your first question is whether or not the music it produced was *good*?" Will laughs.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Well, if the craftsman has a vision but fails to execute it properly, then it was a waste of resources."

"Sorry to tell you, but we didn't exactly try to try to play his victims."

"Hmm," Hannibal says, sounding disappointed. "Did he also have vocal cords in his shop?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"You have to build up confidence for such a display, not to mention skill. I imagine that the killer practiced on other victims first and simply did not display them quite so lavishly, but the display tells me that they would still like to be recognized, so it's unlikely that they would have simply hidden their past creations. And you did say that they were a shop owner."

"Yeah, we, uh, we found that some of his strings were human," Will admits. "Some were normal catgut, but others . . . yeah. Definitely caused a rush to return stuff."

"Did anyone express regret over returning their instrument?"

Will shrugs. "I don't handle that kind of stuff. And no, before you ask, I am not smuggling any human strings out of evidence for you to try and play. Actually. Could you even play them?"

"Some. I must admit that I am only familiar with some of your instruments. The harpsichord, for one. And the theremin."

"The what now?"

"The theremin."

"I've literally never heard of that."

"Hmm. Perhaps it has fallen out of fashion. Pity. It was a lovely instrument to play, although it took some time to master. But once I did master it . . . the sounds were exquisite. Not at all

comparable to a true Song, but a human crafted instrument could never approach that level, so it was an acceptable substitute."

Will tilts his head. Hannibal still hasn't quite let go of his insistence that Will scale him, gut him, and eat him, so yesterday he gave Will a brief anatomy lesson. Most of it was familiar to Will – apparently mer have hearts and lungs and bladders like humans, although in different places and with different capabilities – but the Song Hannibal had only briefly touched upon, and mostly to warn Will that attempting to remove it would earn him a quick death.

"A true Song," Will repeats thoughtfully. "You've mentioned your Song before. I, um, I don't mean to pry, but what exactly is it?"

Hannibal lifts his hand and taps at the base of his throat, where a blood red circle sits. Will had first thought it a fancy scale, but it has facets, like a jewel. Unlike a jewel, however, it glows faintly, as if powered by an inner magic.

"This is my Song," Hannibal says. "You would consider it the source of my power, I suppose."

"Power?" Will asks, because all Hannibal has really done is occupy his bathtub, consumed some steak, and pet Winston, the only dog brave enough to venture close. Aside from being a creature out of legend and myth, he hasn't really demonstrated any real magic.

Hannibal smiles. "Did you think the poison in my spines my only source of defense, Will?"

"No, I figured you could just tear me apart with your bare hands," Will retorts, because Hannibal is indeed much stronger, as they found out when he had effortlessly lifted the bucket full of water with two fingers.

"I was born to survive the pressure of the deepest ocean waters; of course I have more raw physical strength. But this," he taps at the blood red Song, "is more than that. This is a gift from Mother Ocean."

"And the gift allows you to . . . ?"

"It depends. Some of my brethren have the Song of water – they can call upon the ocean itself to create fearsome storms. One of the oldest amongst us has the Song of quakes; it is said that they last time they were truly angered, they caused an entire city to be swallowed up by the ocean. And I have the Song of temptation."

There is no pride in Hannibal's voice. He is merely stating a fact, just like Will might say *I have brown hair*. Yet a chill races down Will's spine anyways, because while storms and quakes are dangerous, yes, temptation seems much more deadly.

Will wets his lips. "There is a tale among humans," he says carefully, "of sirens who tempted Odysseus as he traveled through the Aegean Sea."

"It is entirely possible. We have different names than you for the seas, but there are certainly pods that choose to prey upon humans."

“Why don’t all mer?”

“Fear makes your meat very bitter,” Hannibal explains. “A storm-song would wreck your ship and bring you to heel – but you would be flush with bitter fear and anxiety by the time you hit the water, and therefore rather unfit for consumption. Not to mention the inherent danger in wrecking a ship; in the past, as long as we could avoid the cannons and the oils and the ammunition, we could safely swim through the wreckage. Now, your ships sometimes ignite and explode. Fire can kill us just as surely as it can kill you.”

“And so those who can tempt us – ”

“They get a willing meal, eager to be devoured, yes,” Hannibal says. “And nothing is sweeter than a human dreaming of good things. Your cheeks in particular are a delicacy beyond compare.”

Will puts a hand over his cheek, mostly out of reflex.

Hannibal notices. He has very keen eyes, and not just because mer eyes are apparently much better in darkness – he is *observant* and clever, putting together what he sees with what he understands, and Will is sure that he has gleaned far more about Will and humanity than Will has even begun to grasp at where Hannibal and mer are concerned.

“Fear not; I shall not consume your cheeks.”

“I don’t know, you sounded a bit like you were longing for an encore,” Will says.

“I would not insult you by making you a mere encore, dear Will. If I were to eat you, I would make an entire feast of you the likes of which I have never before made and that has no equal, beneath the waves or on the shore. I would leave no part unconsumed. And then I imagine I might never eat human again.”

“What? Why not?”

“I do not think anyone could compare to you.”

It’s not the first time Hannibal has complimented him, but Will feels a flush rise in his cheeks all the same. Most people don’t think highly of him, after all, and even those who do typically want to merely use him and then stuff him back out of sight, so that he doesn’t offend anyone. It’s strange to be so highly thought of.

To distract himself, he forces himself to ask, “Okay, well, what about other mer?”

“What about them?”

“If humans are delicacies to you, what are other mer?”

Hannibal’s eyes gleam, and his teeth flash in the bathroom light as he smiles. “Appetizers.”

Hannibal, as it turns out, is not kidding about the fact that the sweetness of human flesh is what makes it appealing to him. He's okay with the meats Will brings to him, steaks and sausages and burgers, and he's vaguely intrigued by the vegetables like broccoli and carrots and asparagus, but what he really enjoys are the sweet things. He finishes an entire bucket of ice cream during the course of a few hour's conversation at night. He likes flan and cookies and brownies, and has a particular fondness for a cake Will bakes on a whim. It's nothing special, just two layers of sponge and some frosting, but Hannibal loves it.

Then again, Will imagines that moist but not overly soaked sponge is probably a rare thing to come by when one lives entirely underwater.

"Do mer get sugar high?" Will asks, after Hannibal's fifth slice.

"I'm not familiar with that term."

"Well, when humans consume a lot of sugar in a short amount of time, they get a little . . . stir crazy. Hyper."

Hannibal gives him an amused look. Somehow, he's managed to retain a dignified and elegant look even as he holds Will's chipped and mismatched dishes. "I am not going to go into a manic phase and destroy your bathroom, Will."

"Had to check," Will grins.

Hannibal forks another mouthful into his mouth. He actually closes his eyes to savor it, which is something Will thought only rich fancy chefs did, but he does it with every mouthful. Of course, he also appears to genuinely enjoy it, which is a nice validation of Will's baking skills.

"I find it fascinating," Hannibal says, "how you humans managed to harness fire and combined such different ingredients to produce something like this. The amount of testing that must have gone into finding the best ratios of eggs and flour and milk . . ."

"What, you don't mess with ingredients underwater? I mean, I get that you can't exactly fire up a stove, but . . . you seem the experimental sort."

"Do I?" Hannibal seems amused. "I suppose I do try to mix different things. But not to the extent that you humans do in baking or cooking. Mostly, the farthest I go is to combine freshwater ingredients with deep ocean ones. But we are not driven by the need to sate our hunger the way you are, or at least not the same extent. A single meal can sustain us for far longer than one might sustain a human."

"So how long would that cake last you?"

Hannibal tilts his head. He examines the cake, prodding at the last few mouthfuls of sponge and frosting. "A week, perhaps. Unless I was fighting someone. Then perhaps only a few days."

"Wow. Yeah, I need to eat a lot more than that."

“I can be nurtured by Mother Ocean’s currents. The air does not seem quite so generous with the children of Mother Earth, it seems.”

“Eh. I’m okay with that. Half of the fun in eating is knowing that you caught and prepared the meal anyways.”

“Does that mean that you will change your mind and – ”

“No, Hannibal, for like the millionth time, I am not going to eat you,” Will says in exasperation. He pushes himself to his feet. “Do you want more cake or what?”

Normally, Will talks to Hannibal until his eyes start getting heavy and he stumbles off to bed, and that’s the end of their interactions until the next night, because in fish form Hannibal can make his opinion known, but Will finds it a bit weird to have a one-sided conversation with a fish and so he mostly just waits until Hannibal can actually talk back.

This night, however, is different.

“Will? Are you all right?”

Will’s stomach makes a valiant effort to empty itself anew, so Will is saved from the trouble of replying. Nothing comes up, for he hadn’t eaten much at dinner, so instead Will clutches at the sides of the toilet and tries to breathe.

“Will?”

Will considers answering. Then he considers just drowning himself in the toilet and flushes it, so at least he could drown in clean water.

The noise of the water rushing fills his ears. Will tries to let it soothe him, thinking vaguely about washing out of his mouth and changing in clothes that aren’t drenched in sweat, but he is utterly distracted by these thoughts by the feel of a cool hand on his back.

“What the – ” Will splutters, and wrenches himself around to find that Hannibal has pushed himself entirely out of the tub, tail and chest and all on the floor.

“You were not responding to me,” Hannibal says, sliding closer with one move of his muscular tail, as a snake might glide on grass. “Are you sick? Injured?”

“In the mind, maybe,” Will says, grabbing some toilet paper to wipe his mouth.

“A dream, then?”

“Everyone has bad dreams. Mine are just . . . worse.”

“Not everyone,” Hannibal says. “Mer do not dream.”

“Really? That must be nice.” Will throws the soiled toilet paper away and grabs more to wipe his mouth again. He wishes he could rinse his mouth, but the sink seems too far away and too

much effort right now. “Wish I could just . . . not dream.”

Hannibal touches his shoulder – light and gentle, as one touches a spooked animal. “What did you dream of, Will?” he murmurs.

“Death,” Will says with a bleak laugh. “I, uh, I didn’t tell you the full story. About how we caught the vocal cords guy.”

“What did you omit?”

“I found him first. The others – they didn’t believe me, at first. So I went alone. He agreed to show me his wares. Gave me a whole speech about them, how fine they were, how he only imported the best of the best. Could have been a damn good sales pitch, actually. Except he knew what I was.”

“He surprised you.”

“Nearly killed me,” Will confesses. He touches his throat, where a faint silver line is the only mark that hasn’t faded. “He came up from behind. Almost cut my throat.”

“But you prevailed in escaping,” Hannibal says. Somehow, and Will has no idea how, he’s managed to curl himself around Will, and his cool frame is a welcome contrast to Will’s overheated, sweaty body. He rubs gentle circles on Will’s stomach. “You overpowered him?”

“Nothing so elegant. I just managed to get my gun up. I blew half of his ear off. Of course, I almost destroyed my ear too.”

Hannibal hums. A cold finger touches Will’s ear, delicate like a butterfly. “A victory is a victory, Will. No matter how inelegant. You faced a killer, and although he surprised you, you overcame his advantage and escaped. And in the end, you are alive and he is not. That is all that matters.”

“If I escaped him,” Will snaps, “then tell me why I dream of him stringing me up?”

“I do not understand human dreams, for I do not dream. But I would encourage you think of it another way.”

“What way?”

“Well, if you dream of him, you now have another opportunity to destroy him.”

“The only thing I’m destroying right now is a roll of toilet paper,” Will says. “And your peace of mind.”

“I am allowed to decide to whom and for whom I might use my time, and I do not regret spending it with you,” Hannibal says. “Tonight, perhaps, you are not yet ready to tear him apart. But the next time you might be, or the night after that. You are a killer, Will. When you accept this and let yourself kill him, then at last you might find peace in your dreams.”

It sounds like a great idea, except: “Do you know how many killers haunt my dreams? I couldn’t live long enough to kill them all.”

“A problem for another time, then,” Hannibal says. “Do you feel that you could attempt sleep again?”

“No. But I probably should. I need my eight hours.”

“Might I make a suggestion?”

“If it’s that I should eat you, the answer is no.”

“Very well. Then perhaps you might let me guard your dreams. I would gladly tear apart any who came for you while you slept.”

Will has to smile at that. “You can’t tempt away my dreams, Hannibal.”

“We can’t know unless we try.”

And, well, what does Will have to lose? Usually if he has one bad dream, another quickly follows, and the cycle continues until he’s so exhausted that he falls into a sleep so deep he doesn’t dream at all. Unless, of course, he resorts to medication, but the medicine cabinet is even further away than the sink, and Will really doesn’t want to stand.

“Fine,” he sighs. “But not on the floor. And, um, you won’t fit on my bed.”

“The tub is large enough for both of us.”

It’s ridiculous, but somehow, they manage to get Hannibal back into the tub. He drains some of the water, so that it does not overflow when Will climbs in as well, after he has changed into fresh clothing and rinsed his mouth out. It’s a little awkward to fit himself to Hannibal’s chest, especially when the water seeps into his clothes and turns the white shirt transparent, but between the cool water and Hannibal’s cold scales, Will feels strangely soothed.

“Go to sleep, Will,” Hannibal says, his chest rumbling under Will’s ear. “May your dreams be soothing and peaceful.”

“Are you doing your Song thing?” Will slurs.

“No, Will. Not all of my songs are of temptation.”

Hannibal does sing, though, his voice deep and dark and soft, and Will falls asleep to the sound of water swishing in the tub and the breathing of another being and the unfamiliar rhythm of an alien heart beating under his chest.

He does not have any more dreams that night.

The next night, Will does not mention his snooze session in Hannibal’s arms, and Hannibal politely does not bring it up either. They chat about cooking fish instead, a safe and bland

topic, and Hannibal gives him some tips on how he might consume a giant kraken, should he ever meet one. It's just ridiculous enough that Will can laugh his way through it instead of getting all anxious about his meltdown.

Unfortunately, it's not quite ridiculous enough to stop him from having more bad dreams when he eventually goes to bed.

"Let me guard your dreams," Hannibal says again, when a dream of getting mounted on a stag head sends Will right back to heaving over a toilet.

And Will sighs and shrugs and says, "Sure, why not."

He is, in fact, on his fourth night of sleeping peacefully in Hannibal's arms when his dogs start barking their heads off. Hannibal isn't bothered, but it sure as hell wakes Will, but after a few whistles and shouts don't settle them down, he gets out of the tub to try and figure out what's setting them off.

That's when someone starts banging on his door.

"Ugh," Will says, because that generally means someone's gotten gruesomely murdered and Jack wants him to take a look at it.

"Should I pretend to not exist?" Hannibal asks politely.

"Very funny. But, uh, yes," Will says. "Mind if I draw the curtain?"

"By all means," Hannibal says with a wave of his tail, as regal as a king, and Will pulls the curtain closed, turns off the light, and shuts the door for good measure. Jack normally doesn't barge into Will's bathroom, but Will doesn't really feel like tempting fate.

A few stubbed toes and a parting of the sea of his dogs later, Will opens the door and squints at his late night visitor.

Who is, shockingly, not Jack.

"Uh, Aleyn," he says, blinking in shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Is it here?"

"Is what here?"

"The fish, Graham, the fish," Aleyn says impatiently. "You sent me a photo of that fish, do you still have it?"

"Uhhh," Will says, because in all honesty, he's forgotten all about the photo of the fish he had sent off to Aleyn for identification. After all, Hannibal had been all too happy to tell Will exactly who and what he was, so Will had never needed to check his phone to wonder if Aleyn had gotten back to him. Not to mention that talking to Hannibal has taken up almost all of his free time.

“Graham!” Aleyn says insistently.

“No, I threw it back,” Will says, because it’s the first lie that comes to mind. “I caught enough fish for dinner and I didn’t need more. I was just curious.”

Aleyn curses, violently and fervently, in a way Will has never seen from him. Normally, the only thing Aleyn gets passionate about is when they find weird undigested things in fish stomachs. He’s a pretty calm guy, which is the reason Will had gotten along with him.

He also, Will is starting to realize, is panting heavily, as if he’d run up the steps of Will’s porch. Aleyn is not exactly a couch potato, but he’s not very athletic either.

Will frowns. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” Aleyn laughs and yanks at his hair. “Am I – What a question to ask, Graham, Jesus Christ.”

“It’s a perfectly normal question,” Will feels compelled to point out. “Why are you so worked up?”

“The fish, Graham! That fish!”

“Listen, if it’s that important to you, I can show you to the stream and you can try and catch it again yourself, but, Aleyn, it’s just a fish.”

“Just a fish!” Aleyn repeats, and he sounds as pained as though Will had caught him on a lure and not Hannibal. “Just a *fish*!”

“Right,” Will says, and stands back to let Aleyn inside. He steers a somewhat helplessly laughing Aleyn to the kitchen and fires up the coffeemaker, because at least that will be warm, and waits until Aleyn has had several sips before he tries to say anything else. “You feeling better now?”

“Not really,” Aleyn says. “Listen, Graham, that fish – that fish could have made us rich! It could have made my *career*.”

“It was a fish, not a lump of gold.”

“It was a special fish,” Aleyn insists. He sets his mug of coffee down, and his hands shake as though he had imbibed four cups. “Listen, my dad, he used to tell me these tales, okay?”

“Okay . . .”

“Red eyes, red spots, glow at the base of the throat,” Aleyn says. “In separate fish, kind of weird, but nothing special. In the same fish, though? That was a sign.”

“Of what?”

“Of a mermaid.”

Will laughs. He can't help it. It's probably a bit more hysterical than genuine, but Aleyn seems too worked up to notice the difference.

"Aleyn, that's a tale for kids," he says, sipping at his own coffee.

"But what if it was real, Graham? Your fish, it had those exact same markings."

Will shrugs. "So what? Lucky chance. Fish have strange markings all the time."

"But that exact same configuration as all the tales?"

"We found gold in Pactolus river, but that doesn't mean Midas washed away a golden touch in it," Will points out. "Sometimes myths are made up to explain phenomena in real life. We all know that. Doesn't mean the myths are real."

"But what if they were? What if you caught a real life mermaid, Graham? Do you know how much money we could have made?"

"I've got a house and a car. Don't really need more money."

"And the science, Graham! The things we could have learned from it! Mermaids were supposed to be so powerful, capable of raising storms and causing quakes – imagine if we could harness all of that power."

"Yeah . . . humans don't tend to do good things with more power. If anything, we tend to do the opposite."

Aleyn scowls. "Why are you so unexcited at the idea of a new discovery?"

"I see new discoveries all the time at work. Mostly, it's someone discovering a new way to cause someone else to die. Kinda ruins all of the potential excitement," Will says dryly. He drains the last of his coffee. "Anyways, seriously, Aleyn: it was just a fish. If you're that interested in it, I can show you the stream tomorrow where I – "

"Why are you all wet, Graham?" Aleyn interrupts.

"I sweat a lot. Nightmares from my work. Strange thought, I know, but it turns out that seeing dismembered corpses will wreak havoc in your subconscious."

Aleyn doesn't seem to quite believe him, but he doesn't challenge Will on it. Then again, even if Aleyn had been friendly with him, he had known that Will was seen as an oddity. Or he's just thrown off by Will casually referencing people getting dismembered; that tends to startle a lot of people. Either way, he hands over his coffee cup with no protest.

"I'm gonna go back to bed," Will says as he rinses the cups out. "How about tomorrow at a more reasonable hour we discuss maybe visiting the stream, okay?"

Aleyn says nothing.

"Aleyn?" Will asks, and turns around to find an empty kitchen.

Will curses. The most likely scenario is that Aleyn just went back to his car, but Will doesn't think he did the likely thing. Will's gut tells him that Aleyn did the foolish thing, and Will closed the bathroom door but he didn't lock it and –

Will skids into the bathroom and finds Hannibal having a standoff with Aleyn.

For a moment, Will is surprised. He's known, of course, that Hannibal is dangerous, even in a bathtub – he has some fearsome spines on his tail, and sharp fangs, and his chest and arms are muscled enough to hint at raw power. But he's never seen Hannibal like *this*, with his whole body tensed for a fight and a snarl in his throat. He looks like a nightmare from the deep, the monster that sailors used to claim tore apart their ships and feasted on their less fortunate fellows who never made it to shore.

Aleyn breathes, "I knew it. I knew it!" And the moment bursts.

Will braces his feet against the floor. "Aleyn," he says carefully, slow and measured. "I'm going to need you to leave."

"And let you have all the glory and recognition for yourself? Absolutely not," Aleyn snarls, and he makes a sharp motion with his hand as he turns around that Will realizes too late is him unholstering a gun.

"Aleyn, what the – "

"I am the one who knew it was more than just a fish," Aleyn says, a wild look in his eyes. "Not you. You thought it was just a strange fish with strange markings, but I *knew*. I knew it was a mermaid."

Will laughs. He keeps his hands up, but he has to laugh. "Um, maybe your eyes have been blinded by this glory you're imagining, but Hannibal is very much a merman."

Unfortunately, that just seems to incense Aleyn further. "You dared to name my discovery?" he shouts.

"I named myself," Hannibal says, sounding exceedingly pissed off. "And it was Will who discovered me, not you."

Apparently, for all of his talk about knowing that Hannibal's fish form was a mer, Aleyn had not expected the mer to actually talk. He jerks when Hannibal's voice rings out and his eyes dart to Hannibal as his mouth falls open, and his hand relaxes on the gun.

Will makes a go for it.

He does not get shot, which is great. He also manages to push Aleyn against the wall, which is even better. Unfortunately, Aleyn recovers from his surprise charge, and he retaliates by turning and slamming Will's head into the wall, which is not great.

They are both hampered by the fact that is a small space, and now is very slippery to boot, but Will makes a good attempt anyways. He mostly focuses on staying away from the gun,

staying away from the sink or toilet, and, most importantly, staying the hell away from Hannibal so that Aleyn can't do anything stupid.

And he's actually mostly succeeding and has Aleyn almost to the door when he slips on a wet patch and goes down, and before he can recover, Aleyn is on him with a knife at his throat.

A fillet knife, and one Will knows all too well is very sharp.

"It was a good attempt, I'll give you that, Graham," Aleyn pants. "And it'll add to my cover story. The scientist who got beat up by a crazy man *and* discovered a new species is sure to go down in history forever. Goodbye, Will. Thanks for – "

"*Stop.*"

Aleyn freezes.

"Take the knife away from Will's throat," Hannibal commands, and Will watches in amazement as Aleyn does just that. "Set it down – away from you. Now get off of Will."

Aleyn does exactly as Hannibal orders, as placid now as he had been violent a moment ago. He sits on the floor, and only when Will catches sight of his vacant eyes does he understand.

"You – Your Song," Will breathes, pushing himself up. "Is that what it's like when you use it?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, and Will can hear the difference now, for when Hannibal speaks to him, it is still melodic and beautiful, but when he spoke to Aleyn, there was an undercurrent of power there, like ocean waves crashing against the shore, inexorable and undeniable. "Are you all right, Will?"

Will rubs at his throat. "A bit bruised, but I'll live, I guess." He eyes Aleyn. "Uh, how long will your Song last?"

"As long as I wish it. Although I am tempted for that to not be for much longer."

"What? Why?"

Hannibal snarls. His tail slaps against the wall, cracking one of the tiles, in the most uncontrolled movement Will's ever seen from him. "He harmed you," Hannibal says. "For that, I would kill him."

"You can't just kill him, Hannibal."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'd go to jail for his murder."

"I'd ensure your release."

"Hannibal. You're trapped in my bathtub, and when you're not, you're a literal fish."

Hannibal smiles. “Do you think I need someone to stand before me for my Song to work? One phone call, and you would walk free, and no one would bat an eye.”

“I think it would be many phone calls.”

“Then I would make many calls,” Hannibal says, sounding undeterred. “Your safety and well-being is everything to me, Will. He should die for attempting to harm you.”

“I thought you’d be angrier that he was going to study you.”

Hannibal makes a scornful noise. “As if he could even begin to understand me. Although he was lucky that I was not a mermaid. A mermaid would have eaten him the second he burst into the room.”

Will sighs. He closes his eyes and rests his still-throbbing head against the edge of his bathtub, soothed by the cool surface, and he presses into Hannibal’s equally cool hands when Hannibal strokes his hair and wraps an arm around him. He wants to climb back into the tub and sleep the rest of the night away, but he can’t; he has to figure out what to do with Aleyn.

“We can’t kill him,” Will says. “But . . . we also can’t just let him leave, I guess. Now that he knows about you.”

“Perhaps there is another way,” Hannibal says.

“We’re not eating him either.”

“That was not going to be my suggestion.”

“Then what was?”

Hannibal shifts in the bathtub, and cool lips press to his forehead. Will doesn’t jump, for Hannibal’s touch has come to mean safety to him, but he still feels a faint burst of surprise. Hannibal is willing to be close to him, but he rarely lets that closeness apply to where his Song sits, and yet right now, if Will to turn his head, he would be right next to it.

“The spine in humans is so delicate,” Hannibal says softly. “A slight disruption in one single part, and the brain cannot send signals to the rest of the body. A person might lose the ability to use their legs, or to move their arms, or to – ”

“Or to speak,” Will finishes, when he realizes where Hannibal is going with it. He sits up. “You want to paralyze him?”

“No, dear Will. I want *you* to paralyze him.”

“ . . . Yeah, this is where I say that I don’t know how to do that.”

“I’ll show you,” Hannibal says, easy as breathing. He calls Aleyn over and has him kneel before Will, and he fits himself to Will’s back and guides his arms with his hands. “Here, let your hands rest here. And your arms like this. Any higher, and he would die; any lower, and

he might retain some ability. Perfect. One swift motion right here, Will. That is all it will take."

Will inhales. "Together, then?"

"I would not leave you to do this alone, Will," Hannibal murmurs, and he sounds so impossibly fond that Will actually believes, for once, that someone might want to be around him.

"One," Will says.

"Two," Hannibal says.

"Three," Will says, and wrenches as hard and quick as he can, following the guiding motion of Hannibal around him.

Aleyn goes satisfying limp against him, and when they release him, he puddles onto the floor like he has no bones, still vacant-eyed and silent as death.

"Beautiful," Hannibal breathes. "How did that make you feel, Will?"

Will gazes at his hands. He's broken necks before, but mostly of animals. How strange, to realize that breaking a human's is not so very different. And yet: "I felt . . . powerful," he admits. "To know that I had my life in his hands."

"As you should. You were beautiful, Will."

"I am covered in sweat and water and god know what else. I don't think I'm very beautiful."

And yet, when Will turns around, Hannibal's eyes are bright and fiery. His tail is swishing in the water, twitching like he has too much energy, and his Song is shimmering brilliant at his throat. He looks – well, there's no other word for it, he looks absolutely captivated.

Captivation, Will decides, is a good look on him. Victory too. And power – to know that Aleyn stopped the second Hannibal commanded him to was shocking in the moment, but now, he can acknowledge that it was also a little hot.

"You are beautiful," Hannibal insists, eyes burning as he gazes at Will. "Glorious. Radiant."

"That's just the sweat," Will says. "Also, um, thanks for saving me."

"I told you, I would tear apart anyone who came for you."

And maybe it's the promise of protection, or maybe it's the tingling on his skin from where Hannibal embraced him, or maybe it's just the bright burning adoration in Hannibal's eyes, but either way, Will leans forward and puts his hands on Hannibal's shoulder and kisses him.

Hannibal makes a soft sound, and then he yanks Will over and into the tub, coming alive underneath him, writhing between his legs and clutching at him chest and kissing him so fiercely that Will thinks he might bleed –

And then Will realizes that there are two limbs moving between his legs, and he breaks off and looks down.

“ . . . Are those legs?”

“I told you that mer walk in the human world sometimes,” Hannibal says, trying to pull Will back down. “How did you think we could do so if we could not transform and have legs?”

“But you’ve never had legs before.”

“I was cursed, remember? Fish by day, mer by night. I was bound to remain trapped in those two forms, and nothing else.”

Will’s breath catches. “Wait. Was cursed?”

Hannibal strokes the edge of his face, his hands tender despite the violence Will knows he can carry out with them. “Do humans not have tales of the power of true love’s kiss?” he asks. “The curse broke the second you chose to kiss me because you love me, Will.”

“Oh,” Will says, because he hadn’t quite thought about it that way. He finds Hannibal attractive, surely, and he enjoys arguing with him and he likes sharing food with him and Hannibal was rather hot when he sang to Aleyn and Will’s never felt happier than when he can sleep peacefully curled up in his arms and –

“*Oh,*” Will says again, when it hits him. “Oh, god, I love you.”

“Yes. And I love you,” Hannibal says softly, and this time when he pulls on Will’s face, Will closes his eyes and lets himself be carried away on a wave of kissing.

“Wait a minute,” Will says abruptly, somewhere in between round two and round five, “wait a *minute*.”

Hannibal makes a sound that is probably meant to be commanding but really just comes across as pleading. “Will – ”

“If you could Sing that easily, why didn’t you Sing to me?”

“I *tried*,” Hannibal answers, sounding annoyed now. He attempts to thrust upwards, and Will pushes him back against the bed and raises an eyebrow. Hannibal snarls instead. “I tried to Sing. It didn’t work.”

“I’m immune?”

“More like very strong-willed. Will – ”

“You were trying to Sing me to eat you, weren’t you.”

“Will, please – ”

“Yeah, you did, didn’t you. Well, too bad for you. As you say,” Will grins down at him, “I am very strong-willed.”

“*Will!*”

The next morning, Will wakes alone in bed, which is both normal and yet abnormal. It’s strange to realize how quickly he’s grown accustomed to sleeping with another body next to his, with cool skin and hard scales and a lullaby thrumming around him. His sheets are an absolutely mess, though, which is proof enough that he didn’t imagine the encounter or the sex.

Also, when he rolls over, Winston is sitting on the floor by his bed. Only Winston.

“Hey, boy,” Will says groggily. “Where’s the rest of you?”

Winston makes a soft woof and pants, and that is when Will smells the divine sizzle of meat being fried. There’s just one tiny little problem.

Will emptied out his freezer to feed Hannibal, and he hadn’t yet restocked.

So Will yawns and stretches and pads out of the bedroom and into the hallway. The bathroom, when he peers into it, is both empty and pristine, as though Hannibal had cleaned it sometime after Will had fallen asleep. There is a crack in the tile, but Will’s house is so old that it doesn’t look out of place.

Will finds the rest of his pack in the living room. It’s not unusual for them to be gathered there, as Will keeps most of the dog beds there, but they are all intently sniffing at the floor, tails wagging and tongues lolling, as if they have been tossed tasty snacks, which would be heartwarming except that Will’s pretty sure that Hannibal didn’t raid the dog treats jar.

Mostly because Aleyn is sitting in the chair at the corner, and he’s missing half of his face.

Will sighs. “Hannibal. Seriously?”

Hannibal appears in the doorway then. He is beautifully and gloriously naked, as stunning as he was in mer form with a tail, but now with long and muscled human legs to go with his powerful chest. The only sign that he isn’t a full human is the blood red Song at his throat, although Will’s pretty sure it could be hidden with a scarf.

“Good morning, Will,” Hannibal says happily, and he wades through the sea of dogs to wrap his arms around Will and give him a kiss. “I’ve made breakfast.”

“Yeah, I can smell that. But, um, what are you cooking? And perhaps more importantly, what are you feeding my dogs?”

“Oh,” Hannibal says dismissively. “Just him.”

Will looks at Aleyn again. Now that he’s looking closer, he can see that the cuts on Aleyn’s face are, while seemingly all over the place, are actually somewhat organized, as though he

has been harvested for prime cuts. He also has a knife clutched loosely in his hand, one still oozing blood on his still fingers.

“Uh, did you use his hand to make the slices?”

“Easier to stage that way,” Hannibal explains. “After all, how better to avoid suspicion than to suggest that he, in a fit of insanity, mutilated himself?”

“Not sure that really flies with the whole snapped neck,” Will says.

“You came home, realized what was happening, and dealt with an intruder. Self-defense is recognized by humans, yes?”

“ . . . Right,” Will says, because that sentence alone tells Will a lot more about what Hannibal does for fun when he decides to walk in the human world than he thinks Hannibal quite understands that he revealed. “Anyways, stop feeding my dogs; you’ll give them indigestion.”

“As you wish. But I do hope you shall have a taste of what I’ve prepared?”

“Which is?”

Hannibal smiles and kisses both of his cheeks, one a time, tender reverence in each brush of his lips. “Why,” he says, “human cheek, of course. I did promise you that it was a delicacy worth experiencing, my love.”

Will gets a lot of weird looks from everyone when the FBI descends on his house, but he’s mostly used to it and also he has a story to maintain, so he finds it pretty easy to tune out all of the sidelong glances and whispers behind hands.

“Yeah, I have no idea what got into him,” he tells Jack, who still looks kind of shaken and red-faced from when the EMTs had taken Aleyn’s paralyzed and mutilated body out to the ambulance. “I came back from a night camping in the woods, and he was just in my living room, ranting about fish and squid and bait and waving a fillet knife around. I didn’t have my gun on me, so I figured the next best thing was to knock him out, but he struggled.”

“And you couldn’t just call 911?”

Will shrugs. “You know I turn my phone off when I’m on vacation, and I don’t have a working landline.”

Jack blows out a long breath. “Jesus, Will. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Start with finding out what he was high on, maybe?” Will suggests. Hannibal’s been insistent that a Song leaves no biological markers than any human testing could turn up, but he knows that everyone is going to assume that drugs were involved, so it would be weird if he didn’t suggest it. “Must be a hell of a drug for him to endure that kind of pain.”

“Must be,” Jack agrees. He gives Will a side eye glance. “And you’re sure that you have no idea why he turned up?”

“I mean, I texted him about a fish I caught earlier in the week, because sometimes he collects photos of what species are in the area,” Will says honestly, “but I got an out of office reply, so I figured he was on vacation. I didn’t follow up, and we certainly did not make plans to meet later.”

“Did he say anything when you confronted him?”

“Raving about fish. Couldn’t make head or tails of it, honestly.”

“Will. That isn’t funny.”

Will shrugs and pets Winston, the only member of his pack brave enough to stand next to Will despite all of the commotion of officers taking photos and collecting evidence and making phone calls. The rest of his dogs are all hiding in or around the shed, which is fine with Will; the last thing he needs is anyone deciding that they want to analyze the contents of his dogs’ stomachs.

“Are you absolutely sure that – ”

“Agent Crawford! Agent Crawford!”

A young agent comes running up to them, puffing hard and waving a phone around. He has the pale face and wide eyes of someone who has gotten terrible news, and Will is pretty sure he knows what the news is, so he keeps his mouth shut.

“What?” Jack snaps, irritated at being interrupted.

“They just searched Mr. Fisk’s home. Sir, he has – ” The agent swallows hard, discomfort written all over his face. “There are – There are *things*. In his basement.”

“Corpses?” Jack asks.

“What’s left of them, sir.”

“Great.” Jack sighs. “Why do you always find the weird ones, Will?”

“I didn’t find him; he found me,” Will answers, watching as the ambulance doors slam shut and the sirens turn on before the ambulance begins to trundle away. Aleyn had still been conscious, of that Will had been certain, for he had seen the pure rage and helplessness in Aleyn’s eyes when Hannibal had lovingly plied him with Aleyn’s flesh for breakfast. But he’ll never be able to move again, and even if he does manage to find an alternative method to communicate, Hannibal’s Song will stop him from saying anything of value.

That, or Aleyn’s severely wounded ego.

Jack grunts, his own eyes trailing the departing ambulance. “Same difference.”

“Not really. Oh, and Jack?”

“What?”

“I quit,” Will says, and watches Jack go bright red again for entirely different reasons than before. It’s actually a little funny.

Quitting the FBI takes a bit more time, paperwork, and negotiation than even Will had expected, but eventually, he signs all of the right documents and shakes hands with all of the right people and says good-bye to everyone else. Most of the FBI is glad to see a liability go, actually, and the Academy has no shortage of teachers, although he is kind of touched that they offer to allow him to return on a per diem basis if he ever wants to.

Jack is rather furious, but there’s nothing he can do, so Will walks away free and clear, with no one the wiser of the true tale of what happened to Aleyn Fisk.

After that, he then has to endure more paperwork, because selling one’s house is not an easy feat, especially when it has a lot of land. But he gets a very good price for it, which helps, because buying a house on the shore is also not an easy feat.

Then again, he does kind of have a secret advantage, because Hannibal is all too willing to gift him deep sea pearls and other such fine things.

In the end, Will finds a nice small house located on the shore. It’s not near a desirable beach, as the current is too strong, but that’s fine, because it also means less tourists. And it has a private road and a lot of space between him and the nearest neighbor, so Will happily forks over the egregiously high amount of cash needed in exchange for the keys.

It also has a deck. Old and battered and almost never used, but it supports his weight and could host a boat, so that’s fine.

He sits on the edge and lets his legs dangle into the cold water, humming to himself and waiting.

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal says, appearing like magic from the depths of the waves, silent and stealthy like the predator he is. His red Song gleams in the light of the setting sun, and his powerful tail is a beautiful thing now it isn’t stuck in the tiny confines of Will’s old bathtub.

Will grins. “Two minutes. Are you stalking me, Hannibal?”

“I can read the currents. Also, I know your scent.” He drifts closer and strokes one wet hand up Will’s leg, closing his fingers around Will’s ankle as if he is tempted to yank him under, but then he just presses his face to it and inhales instead. “I would know your scent anywhere, my love.”

“Still creepy,” Will tells him, but he smiles as he says it. Hannibal has very different ideas about courting and romance and love – he is a mer, after all, raised in a completely different environment in a complete different society that operates by completely different rules. Yet

Will cannot deny that Hannibal's obsessive devotion makes him feel warm and wanted and cherished, so he does not discourage it.

Although he will one day have to have a talk with Hannibal about the pearls, because a man can only put them in so many places, and he really doesn't need some police agency thinking he's running a pearl smuggling outfit.

Hannibal grins up at him with his sharp teeth, because he probably smell that Will absolutely doesn't mind his mer courting habits. He extends his other hand to Will.

"Let me show you my world, beloved," he says.

"I haven't bought my diving gear yet."

"I'll make you sure you come to no harm. The currents will obey my command."

"Doesn't solve the problem of breathing," Will points out, kicking gently at Hannibal's shoulder. "You can take in water with your gills, but I can't."

Hannibal flicks his tail, pushing himself further out of the water until he can lean on Will's lap. He drips all over Will's clothes as he does so, but Will is a fisherman; getting wet is sort of par for the course.

"Kiss me," Hannibal says.

"I can't kiss you the entire time we're swimming. I mean, you might enjoy that, but I won't be able to see anything that way," Will says in amusement.

"Do you remember that kisses have power? Like how you broke my curse?"

"Yes. Why?"

Hannibal smiles. "A kiss between a mer and a human has power, Will. Even without true love. A kiss from me is enough to give you the ability to breathe underwater. Not forever, of course, but ample enough time for a tour."

"And you've tested this?" Will asks suspiciously, and then he gets a better look at Hannibal's face and sighs. "Oh, who am I kidding, you've eaten someone like this, haven't you?"

"Perhaps. But I won't eat you, my love."

"You better not," Will tells him. He takes a deep breath. "Okay. Here goes nothing."

He leans forward and kisses Hannibal, tasting that unique combination of salt and water and raw power, and Hannibal grasps his face with one hand and his shoulders with another and kisses back – and then leans backwards and drags them both underwater, fast and smooth enough that Will is sure he's done this before to some other far less lucky human.

When Hannibal pulls away, Will instinctively holds his breath, because even though Hannibal is living, breathing proof that there are other things out there, it's still a bit much to wrap his

mind around.

“Breathe, Will,” Hannibal says.

Will does inhale, but mostly because hearing Hannibal speak underwater and being able to understand him is such a shock that he gasps and breathes in water. He then just as quickly coughs in surprise – and then coughs again, because he is not feeling the telltale sensation of drowning.

“See?” Hannibal says, and he sounds insanely smug.

“I am not rubbing your ego, it’s already large enough as it is,” Will replies. “But, uh, yes, I do see that I can breathe. Anyways. Where are we?”

“Not too far off the shore. But if you are ready, there is so much to show you.”

“Okay. Don’t let go though.”

“Oh, my beloved Will,” Hannibal purrs, and his Song is a bright glow in the dark depths of the ocean, a blood red beacon that heralds death and destruction to all but Will, “why would I ever let go of you, now that I’ve found you at last?”

FINIS

End Notes

A/N: Hannibal eventually goes and bothers Bedelia for a way to turn Will into a merman too. She takes one look at him and is like "oh my god you've gone from terrifying because you eat fellow sea creatures to terrifying because you are disgustingly besotted, ew, get away from me, here's what you want" and hands over the magic spell. Hannibal then turns Will into a merman too so they can be immortal and in love together forever.

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